

JOE PATTEN'S FOX THEATRE APARTMENT

by Bob Foreman

Joe Patten was born on February 9th, 1927, and he lives in Atlanta's Fox Theatre, which was opened on December 25th, 1929. In 1979, Joe was granted rent-free, lifetime occupancy of a deluxe Moorish-style apartment by the Fox Theatre trustees.

JOE PATTEN



THE FOX THEATRE



Joe's first official connection with the Fox began in 1963 when he, as a volunteer, repaired and restored the Moller pipe organ which had been rendered unplayable for fifteen years because of "ciphers." Below, newly-employed house organist Bob Van Camp (in tux) and Joe (in the background) at the organ and at the piano which Joe bought in 1964 and donated to the Fox. The "Magic Piano" could be played from the organ console. To view a video clip of Van Camp playing the organ in 1963, [click here](#).



In 1968, Joe Patten produced the first recording of the organ.

THE ATLANTA CONSTITUTION, Saturday, Feb. 10, 1968

A First for Bob Van Camp

The Fox's Mighty Mo Sounds Off

By ELLEN WILLIS

Thirty years after its debut as the world's largest pipe organ, the Great Moller Organ at Atlanta's Fox Theatre is having a second premiere this week.

A just-released album titled "Here with the Wind," the first recording using the \$80,000 instrument, features Bob Van Camp, WSB-Radio music director who has played the organ for 20 years.

The record is also Van Camp's first album and he plays "the favorites of the Fox," his favorite melodies like "Strangers in the Night," "Winchester Cathedral," "Michele" and "Spanish Flea."

AS A PART of the rejuvenation of interest in theater organs, over the past 10 years, an Organ of the Month Club was established three years ago. The January selection of the club, which distributes organ recordings to members in the United States, England, Australia and Scotland, is Van Camp's record spotlighting Atlanta's "Mighty Mo," as the organ is affectionately called.

"People of the United States and all over the world will now be aware of the fantastic sound of the Fox," Van Camp said in an interview Friday. "Late one night last week I had two telephone calls from Rochester and Buffalo, in New York, from people who wanted to tell me how much they enjoyed their recording of the organ."

Recording began last summer on Sunday mornings after the organ's semi-annual tuning. The difficult task of tuning is performed "with loving care" by

Joe Patten, a sales representative for an X-ray company and an avid theater-organ enthusiast who has tuned the mammoth organ as a hobby since 1963.

PATTEN SPENDS most of his spare time in the five organ chambers which frame the Fox's 50-foot stage.

"Very rarely is the organ used when I'm not here," Patten said.

Though he cannot play the organ, Patten is a master engineer in keeping the intricate traps and pipes in excellent condition. He also was recording engineer for the album.

"If I played it, I wouldn't get any work done," he said. "The greatest pleasure I get is seeing people enjoy the sound of this great organ."

THE MOLLER Organ, second largest after the organ in the Radio City Music Hall in New York City, lay dormant for 10 years, unplayable through idleness, until Joe Patten started a restoration program in 1963.

On Thanksgiving Day 1963, Van Camp and the restored organ again made their debut, and both can be seen and heard at two performances each Friday, Saturday and Sunday night at the Fox Theatre.

The album, released by Concert Recording Co. of Lynwood, Calif., is on sale at the Fox and soon will be available in Atlanta stores.

JOE PATTEN RAPS A RAT-A-TAT ON SNARE DRUM Triangle, Cymbals, Other Instruments In Fox Organ

FULL SOUND STEREO

HERE WITH THE WIND

BOB VAN CAMP - AT THE GREAT MOLLER ORGAN FOX THEATRE, ATLANTA, GEORGIA

CONCERT RECORDING

An April, 1971 article featured Joe's protege Robbie Irvin, who had come to the Fox at age 9 in September, 1965.

Youngest Theater Organist



1971

Robbie Irvin is a 15-year-old Atlanta movie-house music man

Four years ago Robbie Irvin, staff organist for Atlanta's Fox Theater, began learning how to make the instrument produce such sounds as "aeroplane," bird songs, church bells and T-Model Ford horn, and even a "phantom piano."

By Paul Jones

ROBIE Irvin of College Park, Ga., at age 15 has achieved a couple of rare distinctions.

Not only does he rank as America's youngest professional theater organist, but he also gets paid to exercise an instrument other musicians might give their best hemidemisemiquaver to try — the monumental, world-famous pipe organ in Atlanta's Fox Theater.

Moreover, Robbie, a bright and handsome 10th grader at College Park High

School, knows exactly what he's got his hands — and feet — on.

The greatest console of any theater organ in the world, for one thing. For example, the Fox organ's "storm" effect simulated a heavy rainstorm, with thunder and wind. "This effect can literally rock the theater," Robbie said.

The organ not only simulates saxophones, clarinets and trumpets, but can produce such unusual effects as "the song of birds," a T-Model Ford horn, or, via tuned chimes,



1967



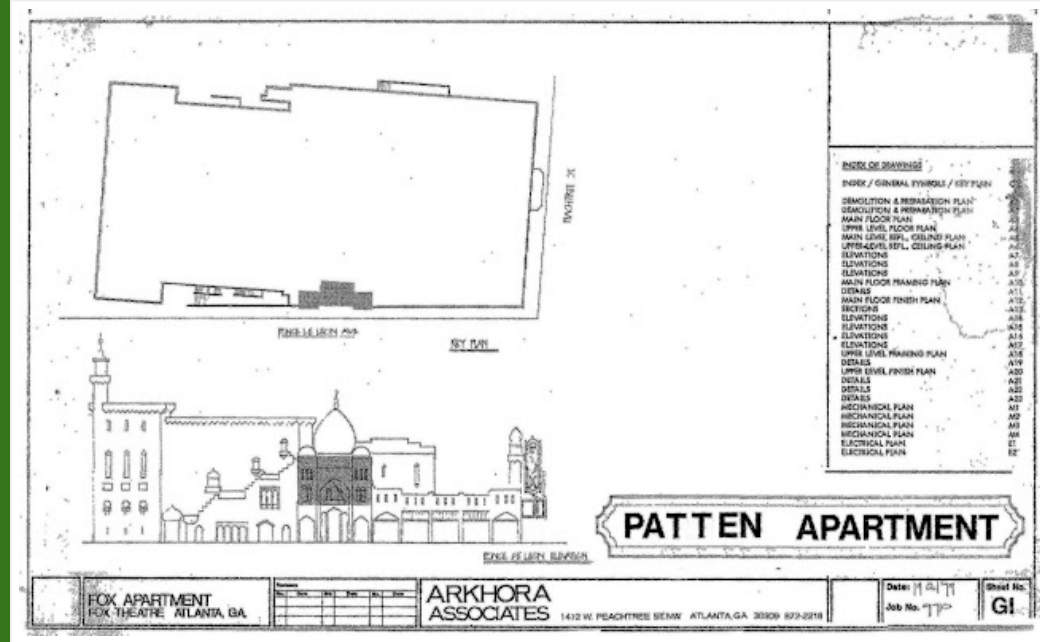
Still a volunteer in 1975, Joe Patten was pivotal in saving the Theatre when it was in eminent danger of being demolished by Southern Bell. Shown below with newly-formed Atlanta Landmarks head Pat Connell (left), Joe poses in front of the "closed" sign (and broken glass) at the Fox ticket kiosk.



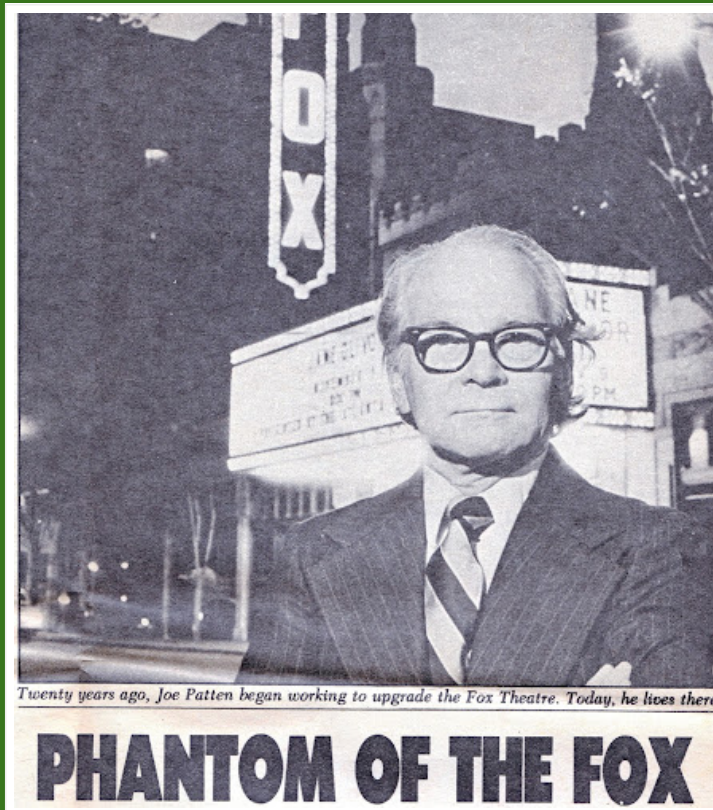
Once the Fox had been saved, and had turned legit, Joe was hired as Technical Director, Engineer, and keeper-- all that in addition to his "day job," as an expert installer of major X-ray hospital installs. In 1980, Joe (shown below on the roof of the stage house) moved into the Fox Theatre.



Tony Smith of Arkhora was the architect of record.



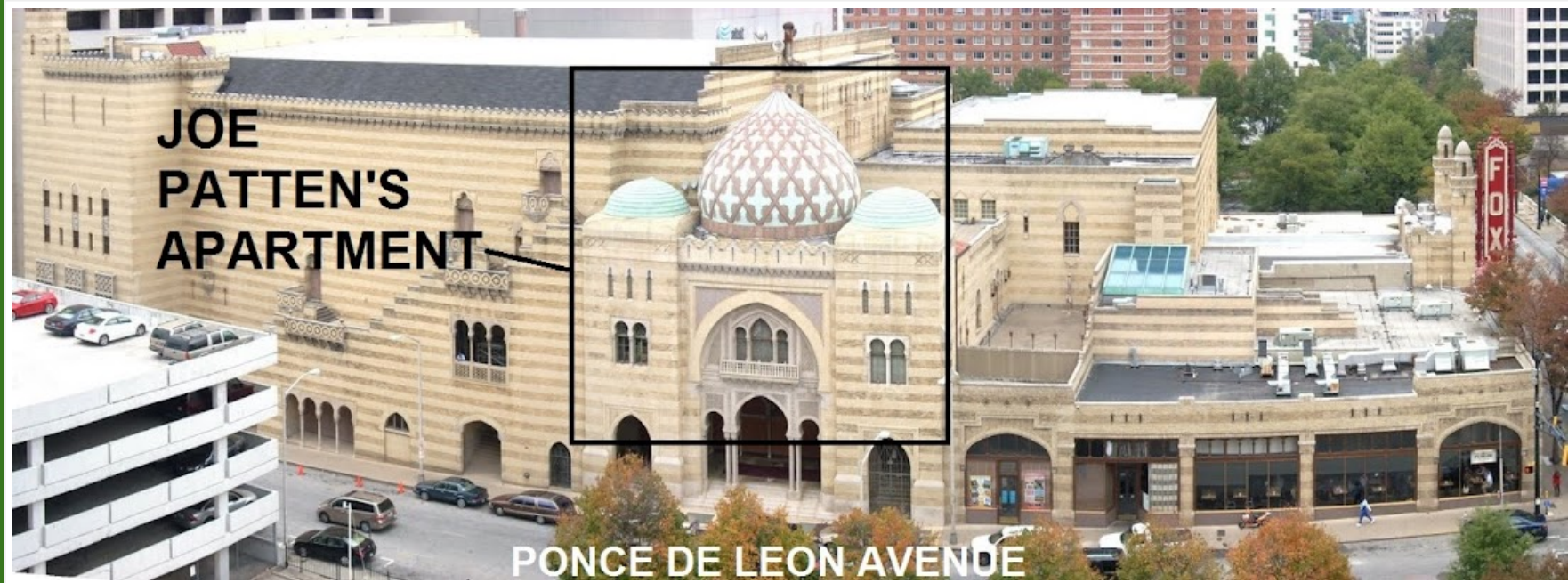
How Joe became a resident of the Fox is explained in this Atlanta Constitution profile.



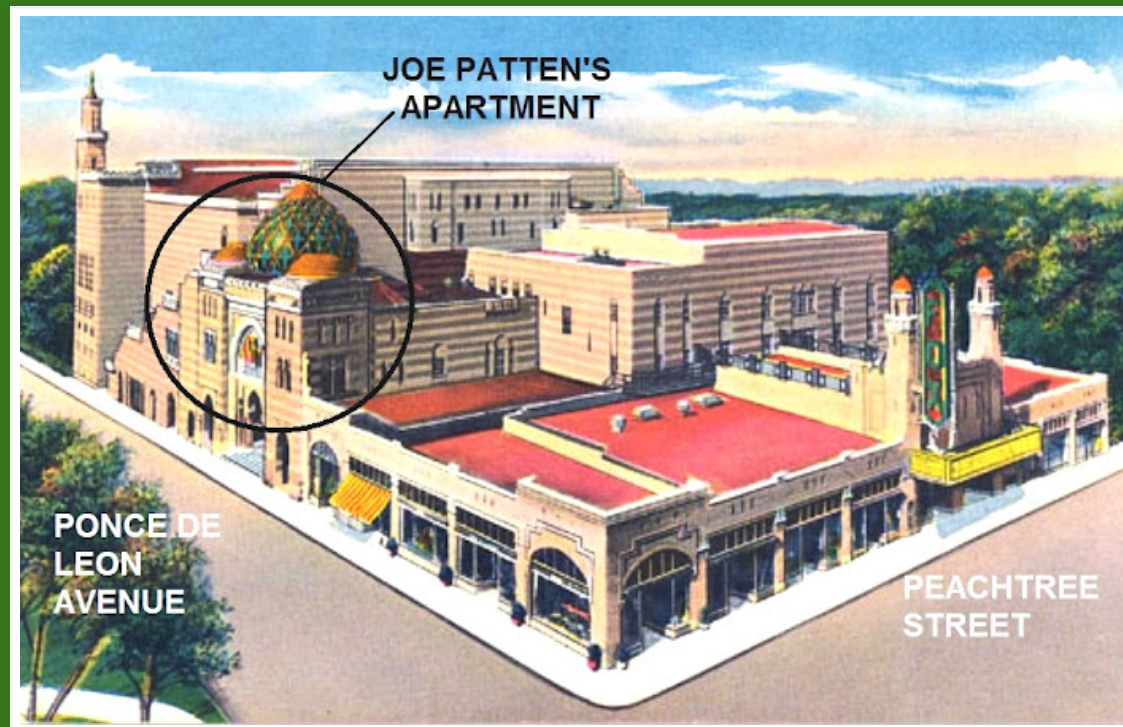
Patten's love affair with the Fox became more intimate three years ago when he moved from his former home in College Park into a 3,000-square-foot apartment he created, at his own expense, from unused office and storage space in the theater building. He is careful to stress that the move was first suggested by the board of directors, who wanted someone in the building as a caretaker. Since he was spending 16 hours a day at the theater anyway, Patten was the logical choice to serve as curator.

"The Fox is Mrs. Joe Patten," says Atlanta organist Bob Van Camp. "Joe is married to that theater."

The 4600-seat Fox Theatre was built by the Atlanta chapter of the Shriners and included vast amounts of space designated for their use. Although the Shriners lost the building during the Depression, the Fox Theatre thrived as a first-run movie house for forty-five years.



Originally the Shrine Executive offices, the portion of the Fox which became Joe's apartment was occupied until 1975 by Georgia Theatre Company, a part owner of the Fox.



Arguably the best exterior detail, the Shrine entry was featured on the commemorative coin issued a year before construction began in 1928.

"Erected 1927" was wishful thinking.



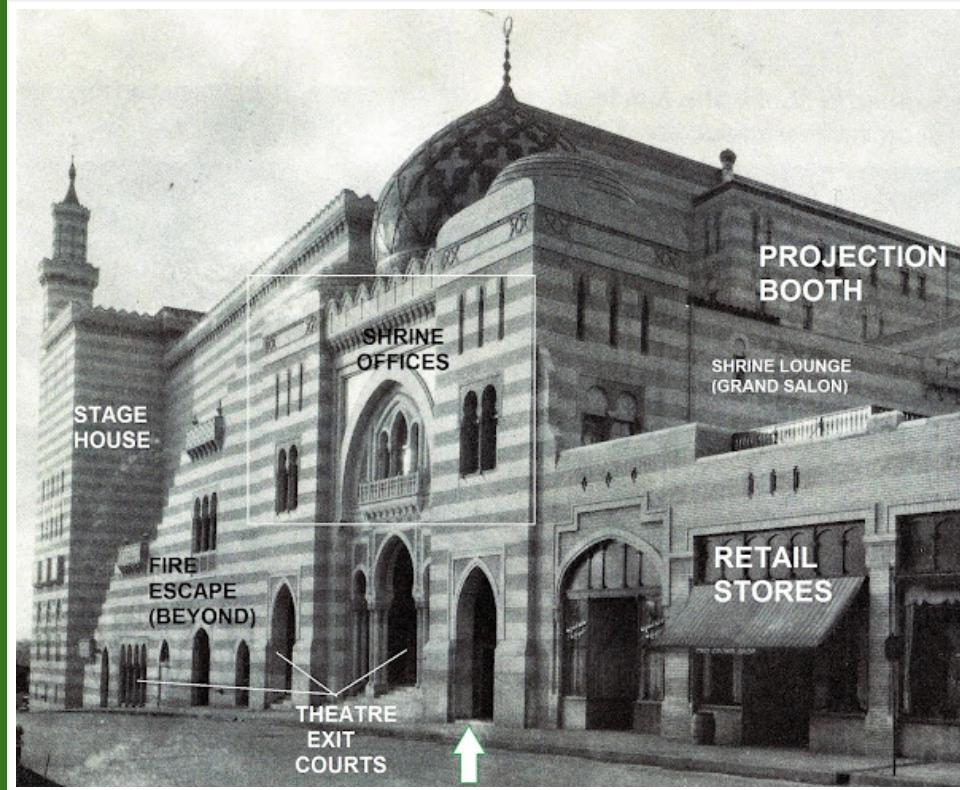
Joe's apartment, seen from Ponce de Leon Avenue.



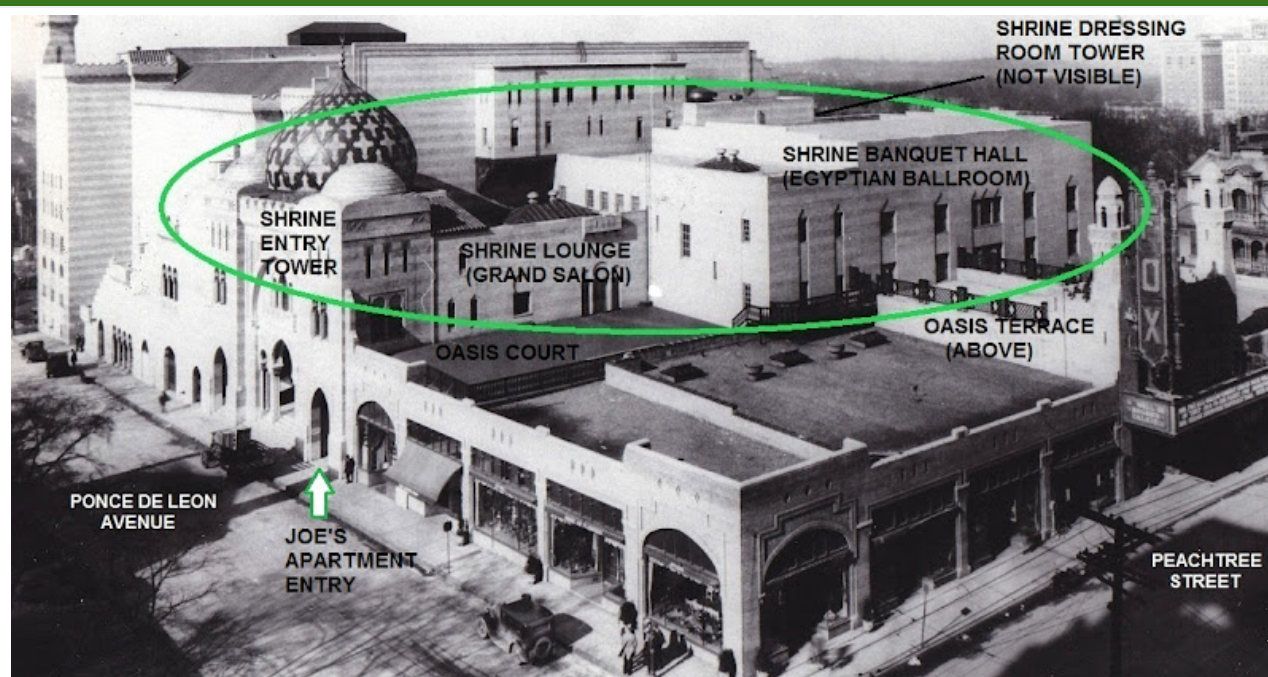
Number 60 Ponce de Leon, Joe's Front Door, was originally the Shriner's main entry to the building.



That same entry is marked here with an arrow.



and here as well:





Once past the gate, the Shriners would climb a stair to the third floor (1), providing them access to the Shrine Lounge (2) and the Egyptian Ballroom (3). Adjacent to the Lounge were the Shrine Executive Offices (4), which comprise the Lower Level of Joe Patten's apartment. (Shrine-controlled portions of the Fox in yellow).



One must be invited into Joe's impregnable lair. A secret code tapped into the keypad releases the invisible gate lock.



Beyond the main doors to the stairwell, the vestibule contains three service rooms, including one originally utilized as a "cab call" for Shriners.



Ceiling detail.



To the left of the door to "cab call" can be seen the electric lock which must be keyed to release the Moorish inner doors. The green button opens the gates to the street.



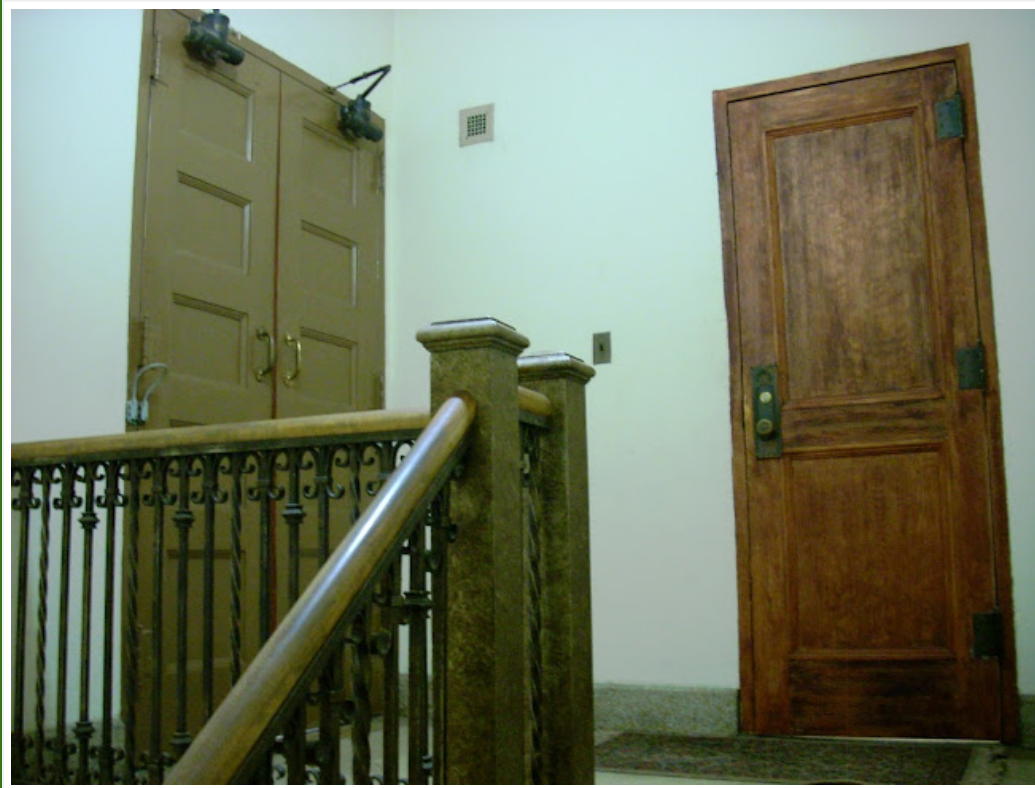
Looking down upon the inner vestibule from the second landing of the stairwell. A key is also required for exit:



Looking down from the third and uppermost landing:



To the left are doors which lead directly into the Shrine Lounge, now known as the Grand Salon. Joe's apartment door is to the right, and all doors are interlocked with an alarm system.



A glimpse through the doors into the Grand Salon.



This is Joe's entrance vestibule, looking back at the door through which you entered, to the left. The new fountain and the window treatments, as with most of the apartment finishes, were designed by Rick Flinn, then Director of Restoration for the Fox Theatre.



Facing the opposite direction, Joe's corner office is visible up the three stairs, making a total of 39 STEPS from street level.



The windows facing Ponce de Leon Avenue are seen dead ahead.



Turning clockwise, the door to The Executive Washroom.



Opposite the Ponce de Leon window stands one of the several examples of custom finish cabinetry created for Joe's apartment. This massive bookcase is built on hidden wheels, is hinged, and the whole thing serves as a door to a secret closet.



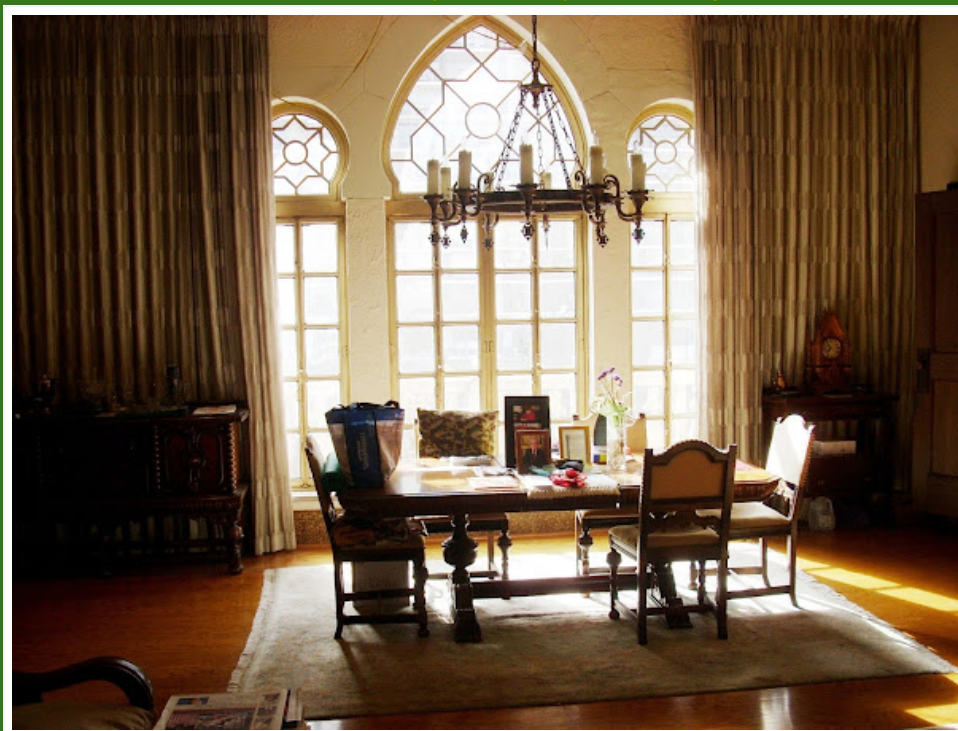
The office leads into the Dining and Living Room.



The largest room in Joe's apartment boasts the most magnificent windows in the Fox Theatre building and a ceiling height of thirteen feet. Here is the dining area, with another restroom (left) and kitchen entry (right) seen beyond.



The Shriners, in the person of architect Ollivier J. Vinour, knew exactly what they were doing.



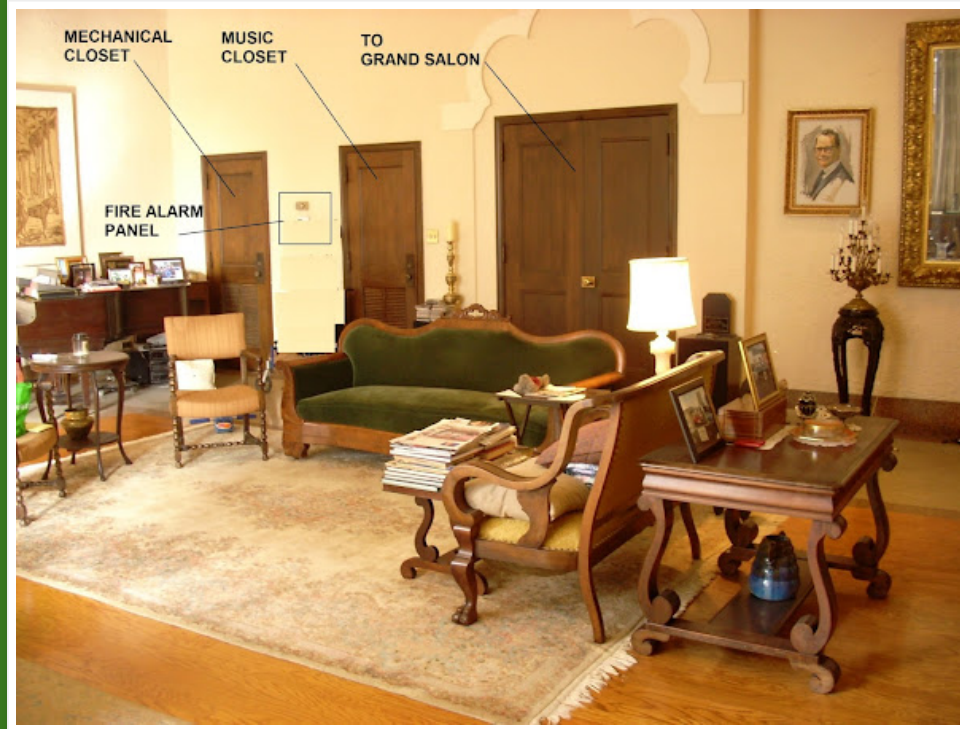
Joe's apartment, which was newly constructed in 1980 but designed to look old, sustains the level of Deluxe Detail as seen here in the original 1929 window hardware. The windows open onto a small balcony, from which official edicts could (and can) be proclaimed.



That window as seen from the street:



Facing away from the widows, on the Grand Salon side of the central room, is Joe's living area. The Music Closet contains the lower level stereo system and hundreds of piano rolls for the Chickering reproducing grand, seen to the left. The fire alarm panel (boxed) served a crucial role in 1996, when Joe, then age 69, saved the Fox a second time.



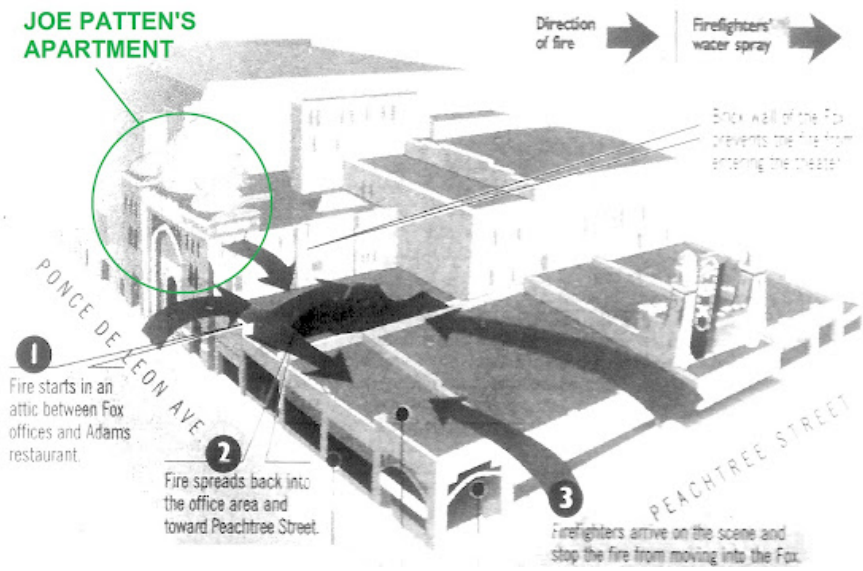
Joe was awakened at 5:10 on a Monday morning by the fire alarm remote panel, which showed the location of the fire to be in the administrative offices located adjacent to his apartment. He immediately summoned the fire department.

FOX THEATRE FIRE, APRIL, 1996, courtesy AJC

Strong wall of Fox leaves theater unscathed

The order of events that led to the burning of the restaurant and its surrounding damage

**JOE PATTEN'S
APARTMENT**



By 9:28 the four-alarm fire had been extinguished, having been contained to the offices, and the next evening a road show musical opened on schedule in the Theatre.



The aftermath of the fire, seen from Joe's Apartment. [To view a short video clip of the fire, click here.](#)



Meanwhile, back at the ranch: Beneath the piano, the original terrazzo border meets the new flooring. The kitchen door is seen to the left.



The kitchen is an entirely new room, featuring custom cabinetry, tile floor, counters and ornamental backsplash.



Tile detail:



The window wall:



In the kitchen resides the safe that Joe rescued from an abandoned retail store formerly occupied by Aetna, shown in a 1974 photo (inset). Herring Patent Champion is the safe's model name, and Chamberlin, Johnson & Company was a leading Atlanta department store which failed in the Depression.



Leaving the kitchen, one can see Joe's Hammond RT-3, to the far left.



"The steep and very narrow staircase" leads to the upper level of Joe's place.



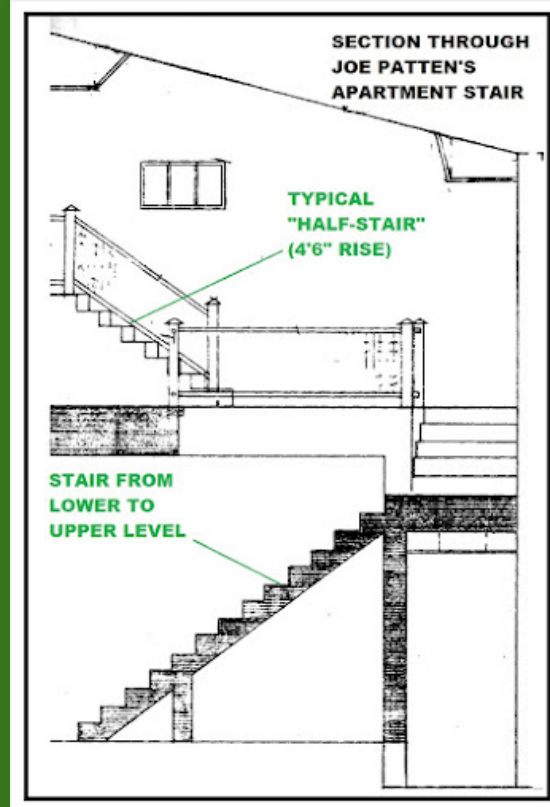
Looking back down:



The three upper level spaces were labeled "file rooms" on the drawings and were non-ornamental utility spaces, connected via Escher-like half-stairs so to allow the thirteen foot ceiling height in the central lower level room, while maximizing the ceiling heights of the file rooms.



Those stairs in section:



Stair landing nook:



At the landing elevation is Joe's guest bedroom, where the bed is framed by a new partition, complete with Moorish arches, which conceals a new half-stair up to the new guest bathroom.



Up a half-stair from the Guest bedroom is the Music Room, complete with McIntosh tube amplifiers and circular stair to the central dome. The Music Room shares the center upper level with two new full baths and mechanical equipment for the entire apartment, which unlike the Theatre proper, was not originally air-conditioned.



Down yet another half-stair is the Master bedroom.

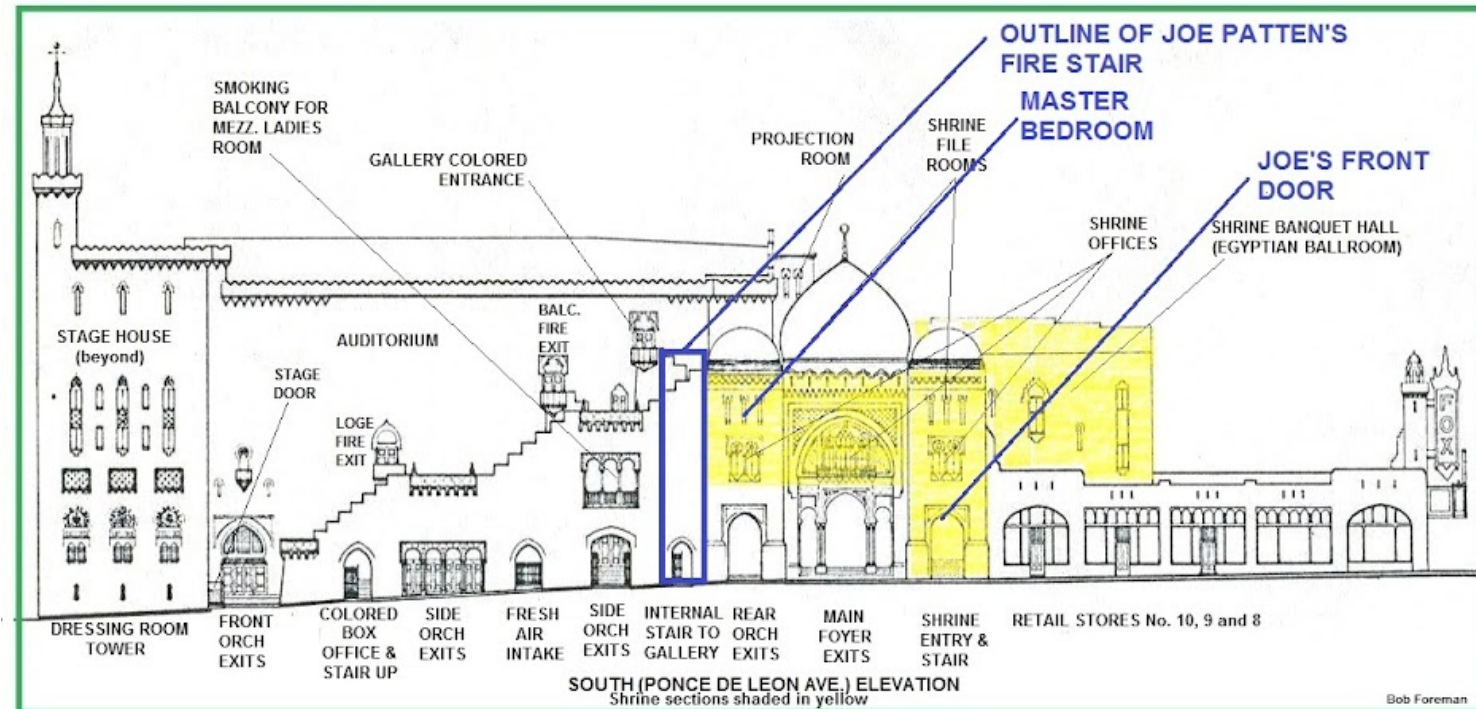




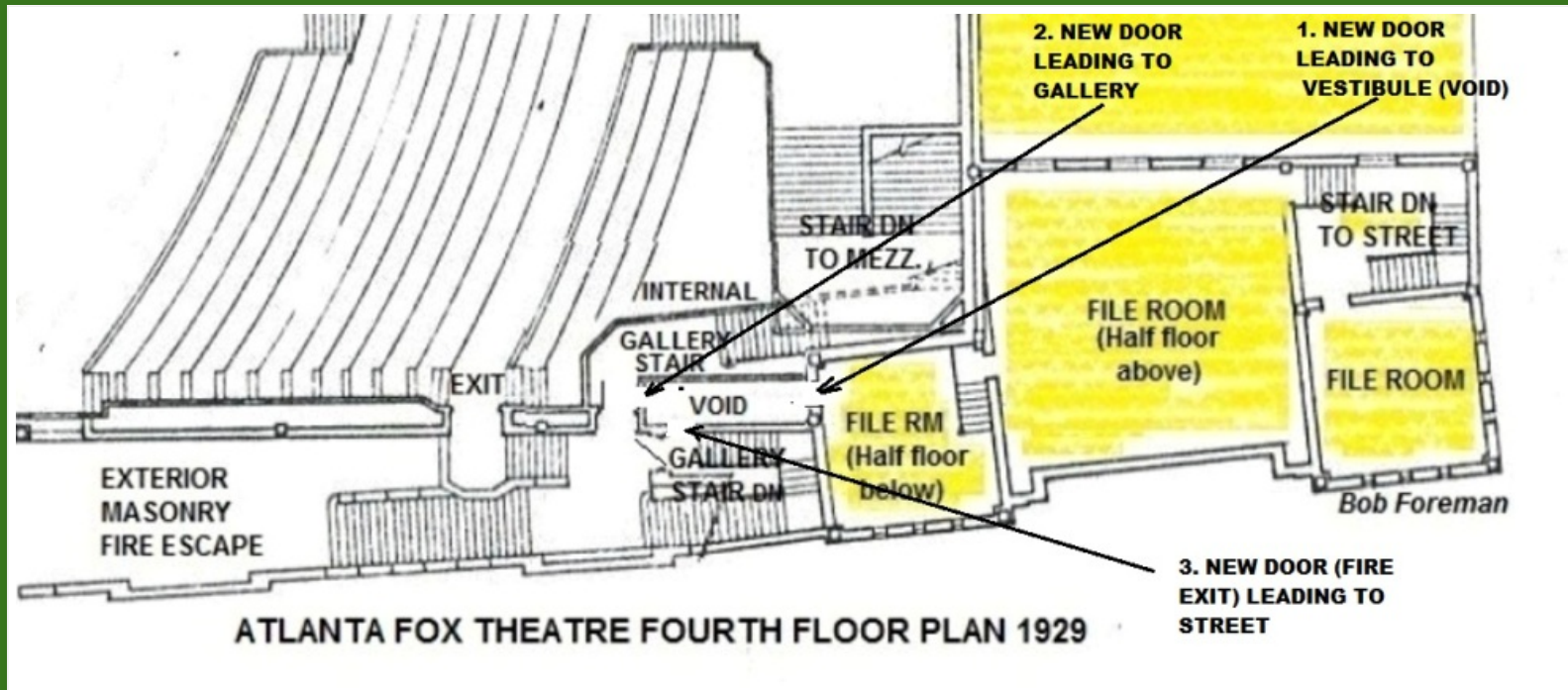
Looking from the half-stair into the Master bedroom, one can see the fire exit, Joe's "Phantom" door, cut through the wall to connect to an existing secret fire stair.



Joe's bedroom connects with two internal stairs which run from the Gallery to the exterior fire escape, then to the street. The stairs, unused for many decades, was originally utilized by projectionists to reach the booth when the Gallery (for Colored patrons) was segregated and walled off from the balcony proper. To read more about the colored entrance, [click here](#).

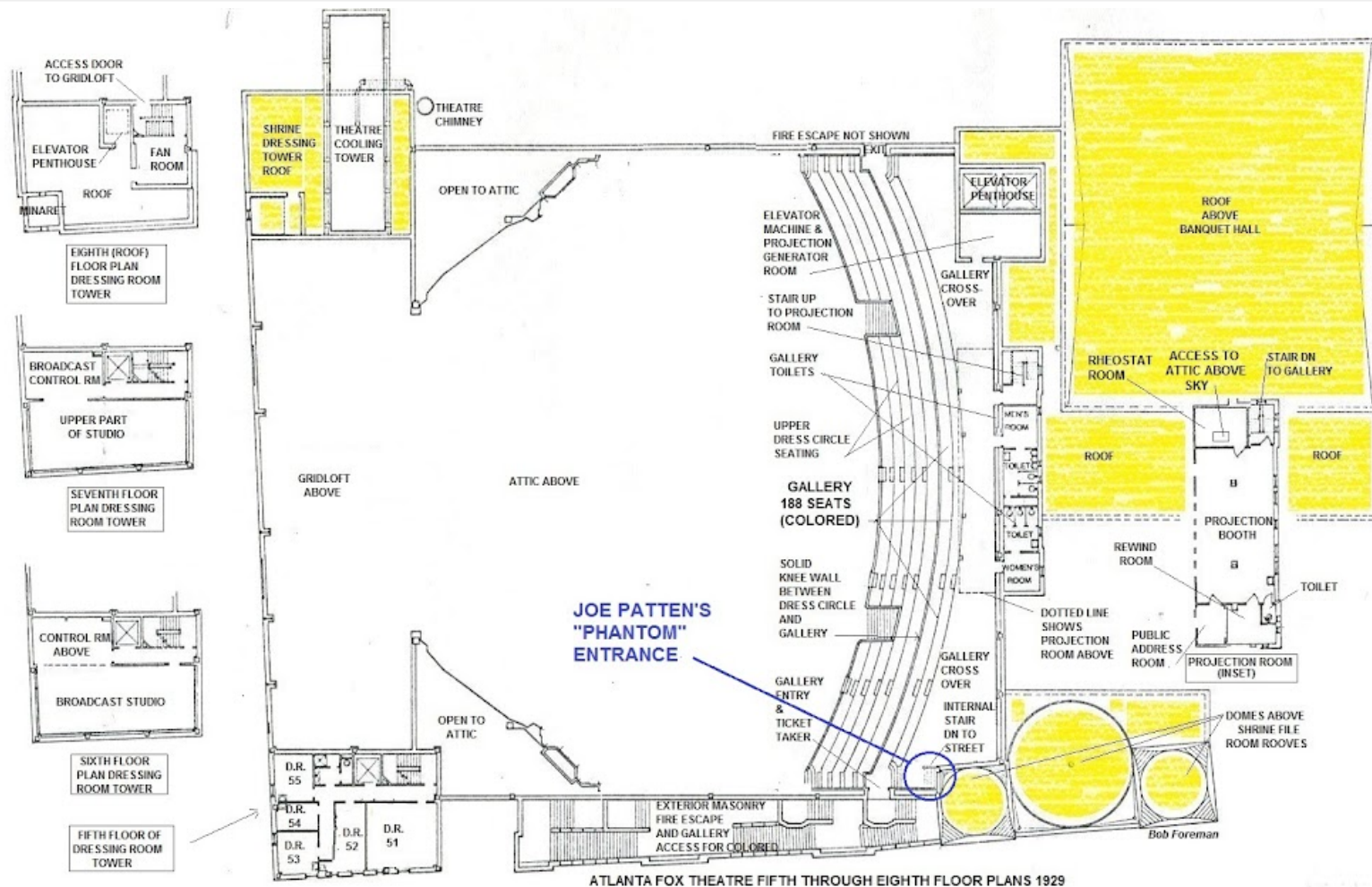


The new doors which were cut:

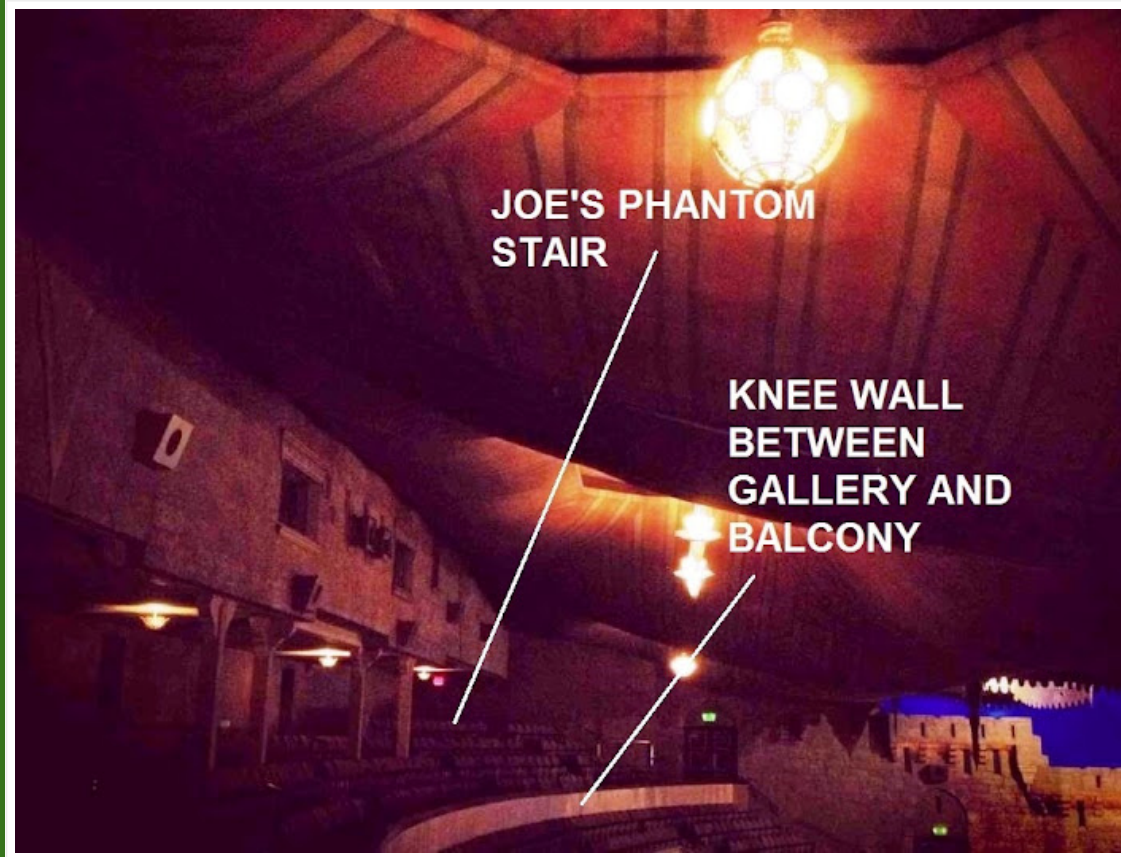


Joe walking from his bedroom door in new vestibule, formerly a void:





The stair brings one up to the very top of the Theatre.



Three new matching gates, including the one at Joe's Apartment entry, were donated by Arthur Montgomery, who was Fox Board Chairman and a big supporter of Joe Patten.

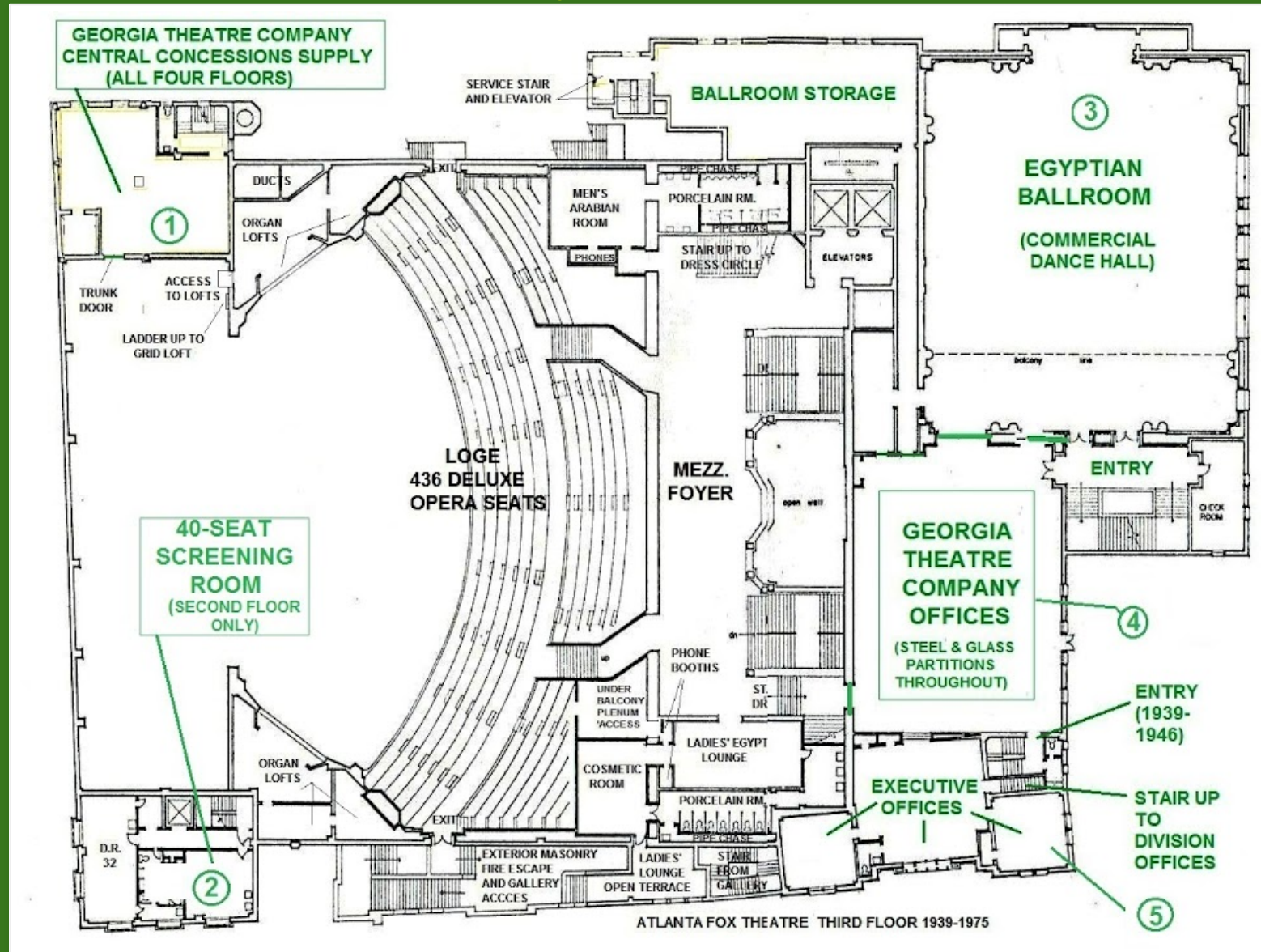


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After the Shriners lost the Fox due to their inability to meet mortgage payments, the facility was purchased in the early 30's fifty-fifty by Paramount Pictures and Lucas & Jenkins (L&J), a Georgia exhibition chain with a hundred theatres. The Shriners remained in the building as paying tenants, slowly squeezed out as the years passed, until they vacated entirely in 1949. Their final outpost was the plain-Jane Practice Room (later named the Spanish Room), off of the Arcade.



By then, Georgia Theatre Company, the successor to the Jenkins interests, occupied (1) the Shrine dressing rooms for candy storage; (2) the Green Room and dressing room 21 for a screening room; (3) the Egyptian Ballroom, which they rented to a dance hall operator; and for their considerable office space requirements, both (4) the Shrine Lounge (Grand Salon) and (5) the former Shrine offices.



When Joe's apartment was constructed, the former Shrine areas had become the most neglected in the building. The Georgia Theatre Company office entry which would become Joe's front door (left) looked like this in 1980 (right), with the Lucas & Jenkins logo.

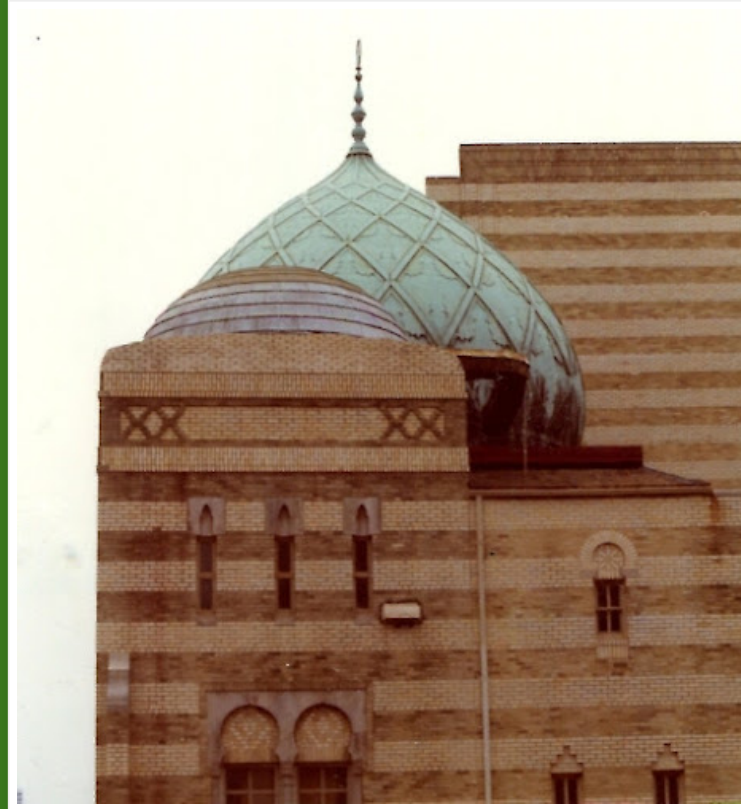


The stairwell had become a storage room for 64-sheet billboards.

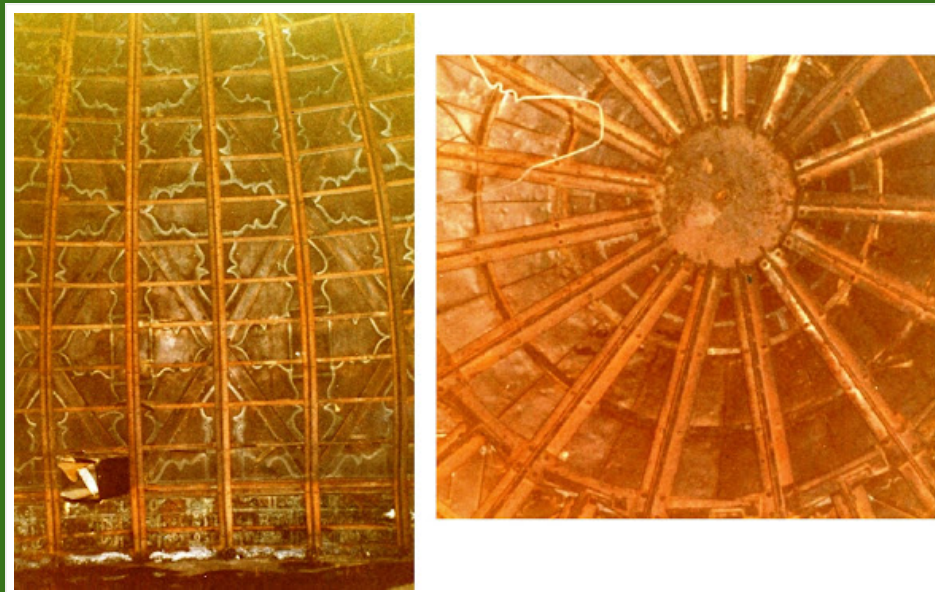




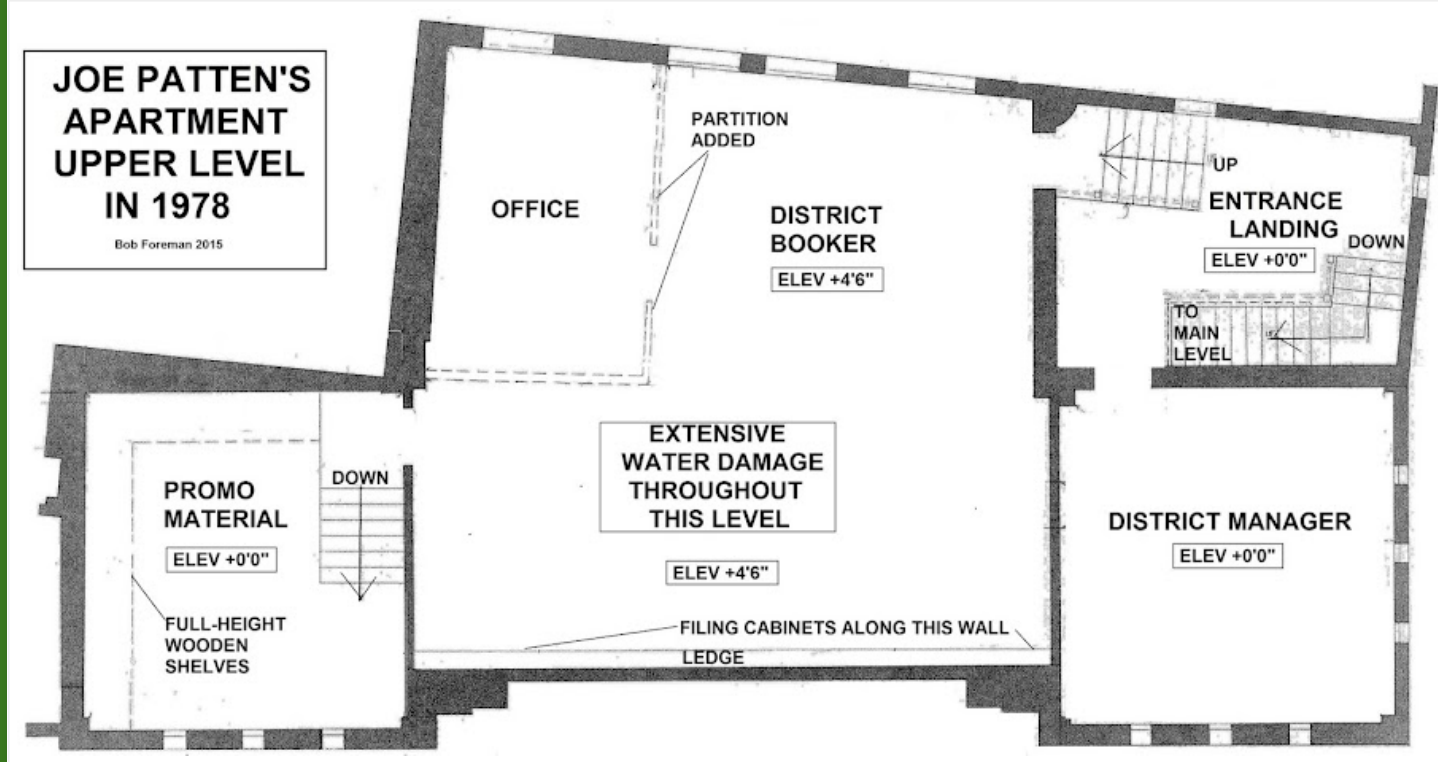
The space that Joe selected to be his apartment was not only unused, but unusable due to severe leaks, where the three domes met the roof.



Inside the main dome in 1979:



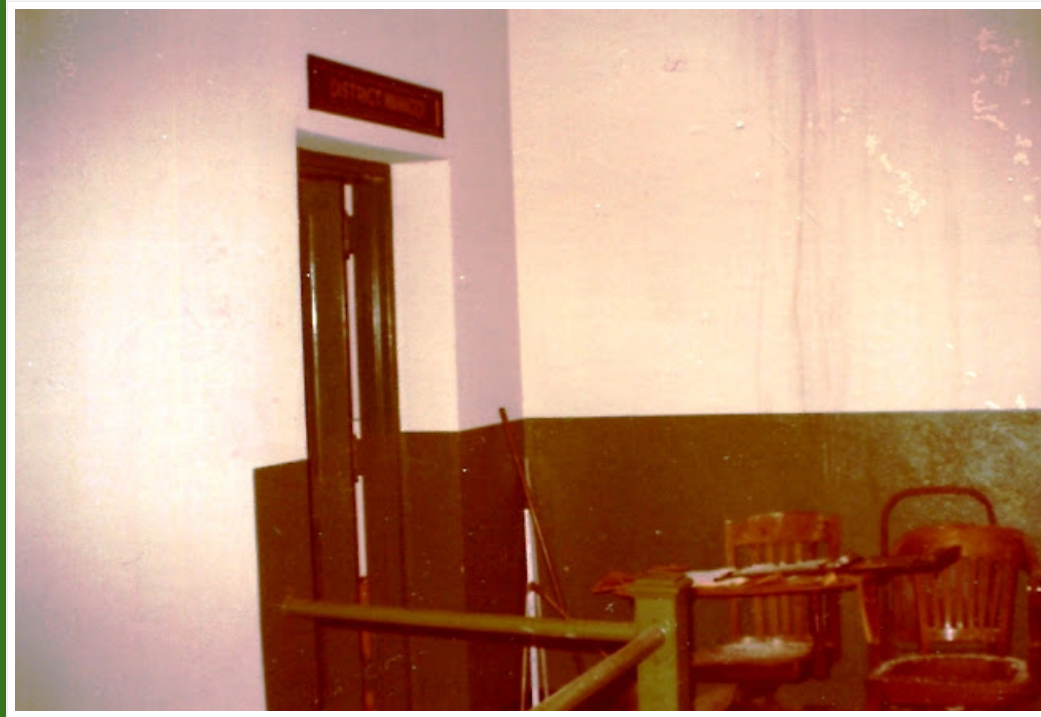
What would become the second level of Joe's Apartment had been abandoned by Georgia Theatres long ago:



Promotional material, much of it damp, was strewn throughout the upper level.



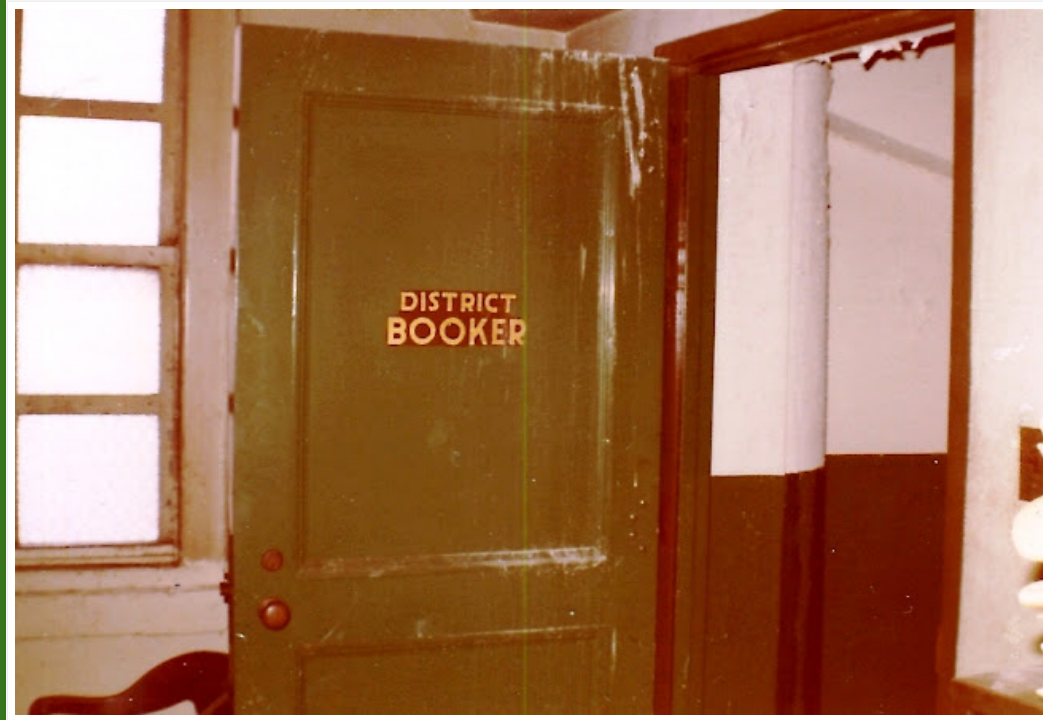
Landing at future Guest Bedroom:



Guest Bedroom:



Door to future Music Room:



Music Room:



Future bathrooms:



Master Bedroom:



The already sunken Master Bedroom, doubly sunk with a perpetually wet floor.



Stray furnishings, some from the Shrine Lounge:



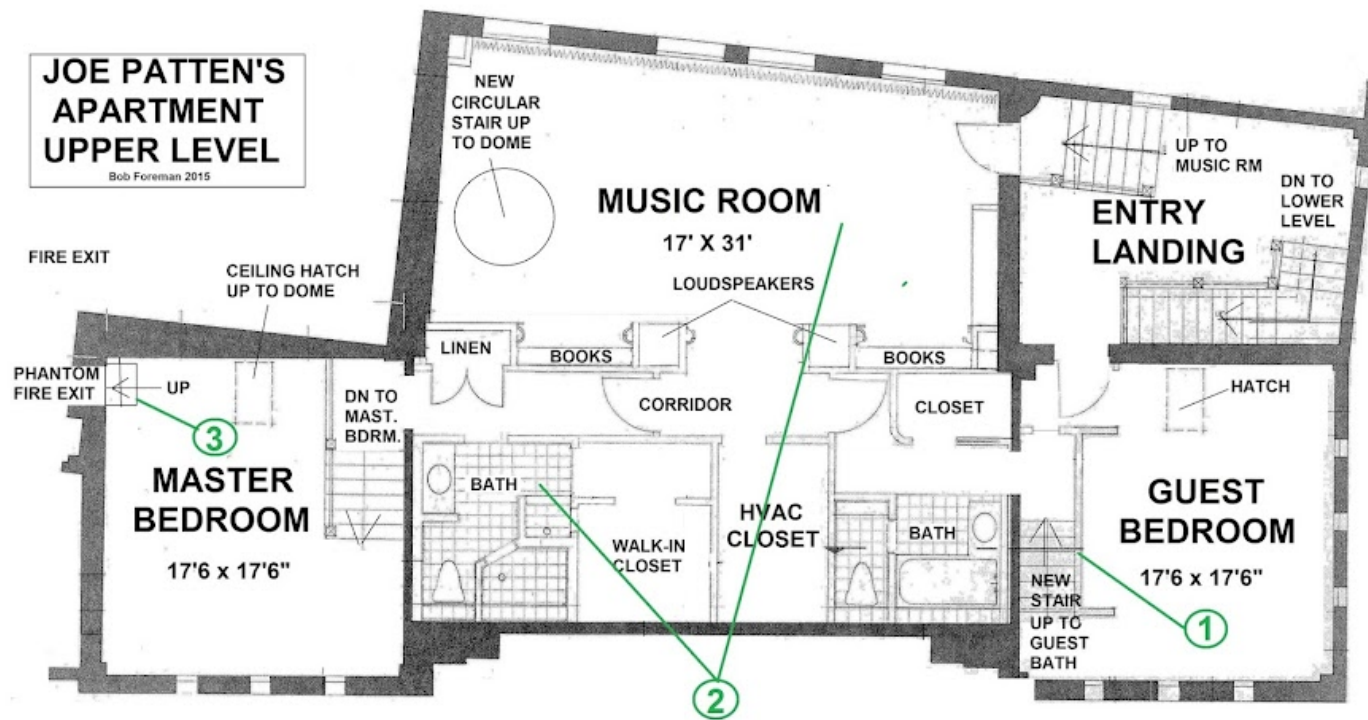
The only remaining swatch of the original Theatre carpet served as the sample for its eventual reproduction.



The plans for Joe's Apartment called out for a comprehensive roof repair, and the majority of new construction took place on the newly-reclaimed Upper Level. (1) A new opening and stair connected the Guest Room to its bath; (2) all new Music Room and baths; (3) new opening to existing internal stair.

JOE PATTEN'S APARTMENT UPPER LEVEL

Bob Foreman 2015



Construction shots of upper level:













The Grand Salon shown here in 1975, following the removal of the steel and glass partitions which had been firmly rooted to the terrazzo by Georgia Theatre Company. The Salon's lighting fixtures, room-sized rug, and most of its furnishings were long gone.



The construction of Joe Patten's Apartment necessitated the design and installation of doors and door frame within the arch leading from the Grand Salon. The central room, shown partially furnished, served as an *ad hoc* conference room in the late 1970's.



Another 1975 view of the offices adjacent to the Grand Salon showing the metal and glass partitions which also filled the Salon proper.



The new doorway and doors. The partition was lead-lined to separate the Apartment from the Theatre, acoustically.



Looking from the Central room at the new partition:



The bronze window trim, painted over.



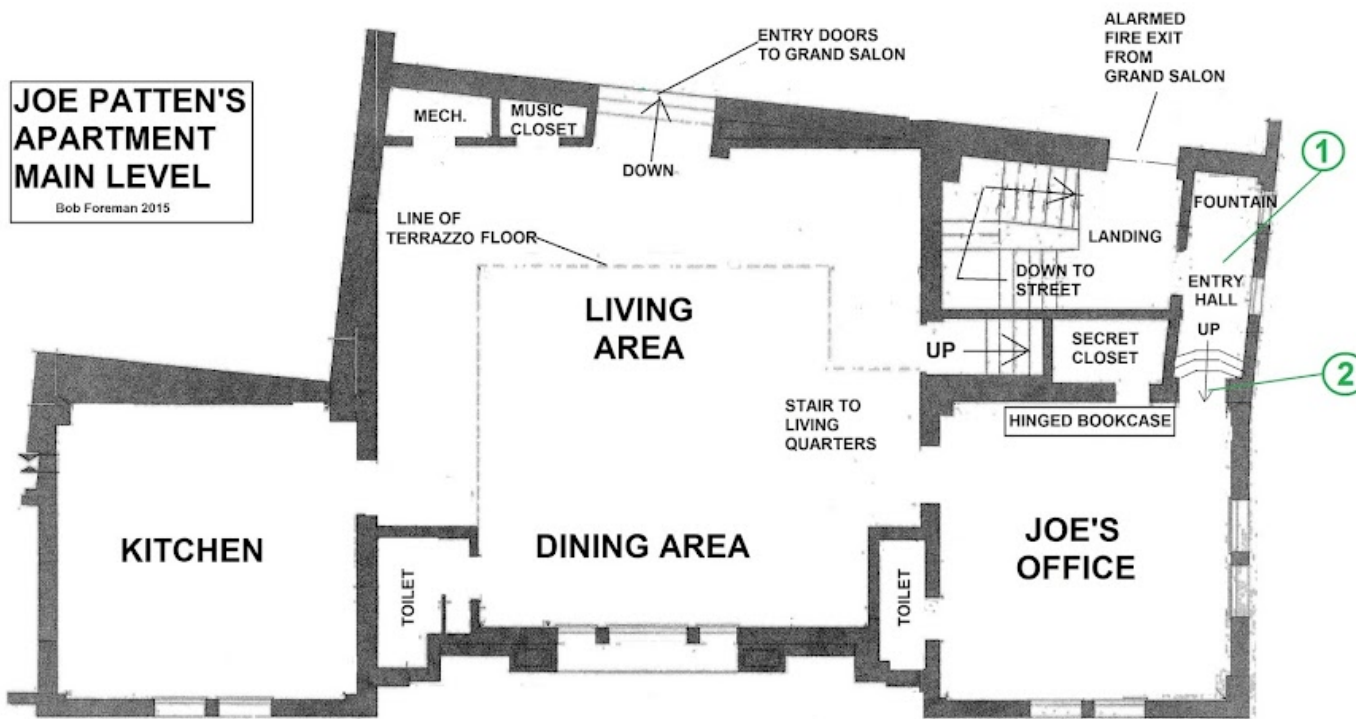
The transformation in progress. The only real marble, like in the Theatre, was the baseboard.



First General Manager of the Fox, Ted Stevens (right) visits Joe in December, 1979 just prior to the completion of the apartment.



The Shrine Offices were originally accessible only from the Grand Salon, and what is now Joe's entrance vestibule (1) was originally a restroom. An opening (2) was cut and stairs added to connect the Apartment to the Main Stairwell.



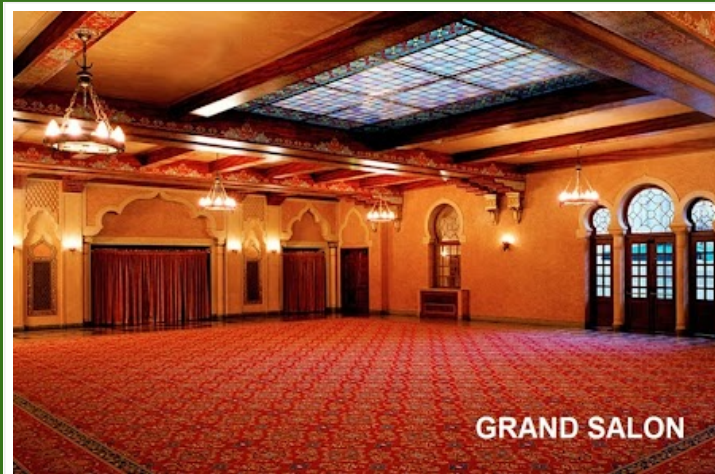
Joe's lease agreement stipulated that he pay any and all construction expenses, with a minimum of \$50,000. But according to designer Rick Flinn, the finished apartment cost almost twice that, where at every step the more expensive option was chosen. Flinn contends that cash infusions from benevolent Board Chair Arthur Montgomery supplied the difference.

As to Lessor: Signed, sealed and delivered in the presence of: <i>Emily Ann McElroy</i> Unofficial Witness <i>Jawell M. Strickling</i> Notary Public Notary Public, Georgia, State at Large My Commission Expires Feb. 23, 1990	LESSOR: ATLANTA LANDMARKS, INC. By: <i>[Signature]</i> (SEAL) President Attest: <i>E. Harold Stokes</i> (SEAL) Treasurer By: <i>Arthur I. Montgomery</i> (SEAL) Chairman of the Board
As to Lessee: Signed, sealed and delivered in the presence of: <i>Emily Ann McElroy</i> Unofficial Witness <i>Jawell M. Strickling</i> Notary Public Notary Public, Georgia, State at Large My Commission Expires Feb. 23, 1990	LESSEE: <i>Joe G. Patten</i> (SEAL) JOE G. PATTEN

The Fox Theatre was so poor in the late 70's that it teetered on the verge of folding. Grass root donations had paid off the \$2 million mortgage in March of 1978, but part of that cash was \$70,000 for emergency roof repair. Below Joe (left) poses for a promo shot in celebration of Norelco's gratis relamping of the Marquee and Vertical Sign, giving 3000 functioning light bulbs, for which Joe had to beg.



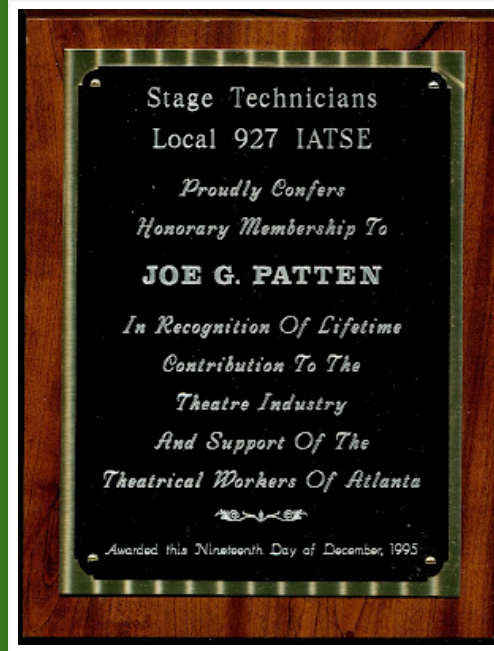
From his new regal roost, Joe Patten would oversee millions of dollars spent to restore the Fox: new (old) carpet and new (old) seats; complete rewiring including the Sunrise/Sunset effect and fire alarm; and the construction of tasteful new concession areas, connecting the Spanish Room to the Main Foyer. Total restoration of the Salon and Ballroom would follow.



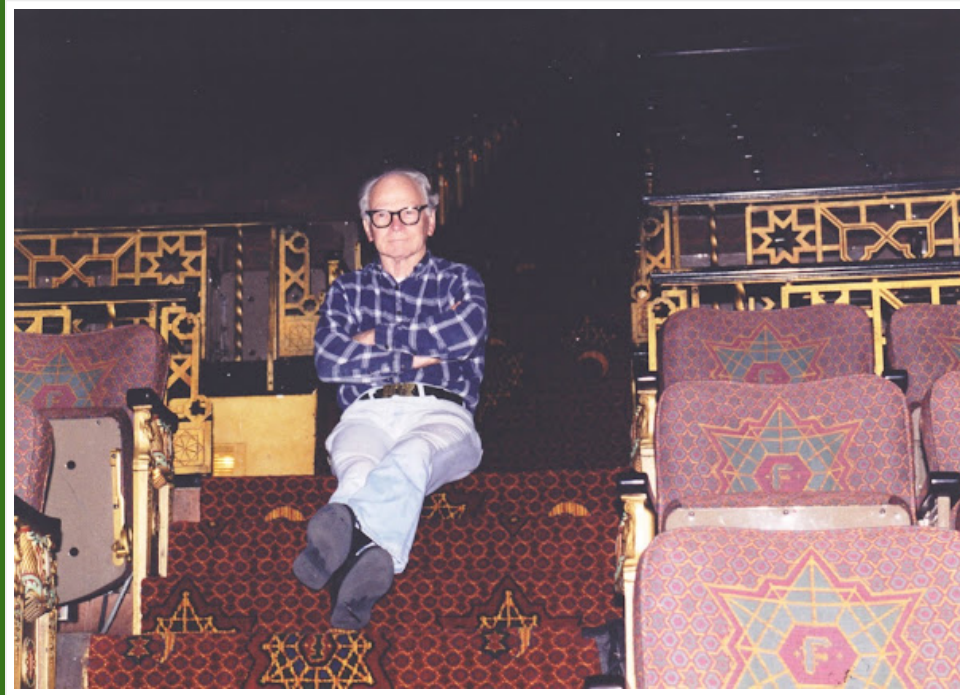
But all that lay far in the future. For six months in 1981, Joe Patten served not only as TD and Engineer, but also as acting General Manager, when Fox Board disfavor resulted in the sudden resignation of GM Alan McCracken after his theatre rental bookings had become alarmingly sparse.



Joe enjoyed a close relationship with the Fox stagehands, IASTE Local 927, as evidenced in the plaque presented him by the Local in 1995.



This shot from 1998 shows Joe in a rare moment of repose, doing what he most enjoyed: listening to the organ from Loge, Center.



That organ in its fully-restored majesty, Larry Embury at the controls.



My father, R.L. Foreman, Jr, who has been Joe's best friend for almost fifty years, is pictured with Joe below in 2003, two years after Joe's retirement as "Technical Director."



Joe, left foreground, cutting his birthday cake in 1976, outside his future apartment. Also shown are the author and his mom.



Occasionally, Joe would host functions where both his Apartment and Grand Salon would be combined, below in 1996 and in 2003.



Joe and my Dad, together as usual.



###

Joe Patten passed away on April 7, 2016 at age 89. To read his obituary in *The New York times*, [click here](#). To view a brief 1982 video profile of

Joe, [click here](#). To view a Joe Patten photo gallery, [click here](#). To view the 2002 Atlanta Magazine profile of Joe, [click here](#).

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December, 2015.

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